Richmond

KOOTENAI BROWN TELLS THRILLS OF EARLY DAYS IN CARIBOO GOLD RUSH

(The Lethbridge Herald, August, 1924. By W. McD. Tait in the Vancouver Province.)

Of all the glorious band of pioneers that trod the trails of the Pacific Coast when it was a wilderness, few remain, and each year sees the number of these survivors of an heroic past diminish. Soon they will all have passed over the Great Divide and only the imperishable record of their deeds will remain.

The men who traveled with an axe in one hand and a rifle in the other surely possessed industry, courage, and shrewdness. Otherwise their journeys would have been short. The early pioneers of this coast had these qualities in a remarkable degree. Grim necessity taught them the lesson of organizing and conserving their forces. They learned the secrets of wild things and put them to their own use.

John George Brown came to the Pacific Coast in 1862, and because he traded with and spoke the language of the Kootenaie Indians, He was dubbed "Kootenaie" Brown. The spelling was afterwards changed to "Kootenai", and by that name he was known throughout the fifty-four years of his life in Western America.

"Kootenai" Brown has played many roles in the drama of life. He has been student, army officer, convict, jailer, sailor, prospector despatch rider, interpreter, storekeeper, buffalo hunter, rancher, cowpuncher, game warden, forest ranger, scout, guide, park superintendent and a few more.

This old pioneer first touched this hemisphere in 1861 at the

Isthmus of Panama. The summer of '62 was spent in San Francisco, then "a small town with a wooden wharf, dangerous to walk on at night."

The next winter he came to British Columbia and chopped poles for a living near Victoria, when "Old Governor Douglas was head bamboo chief there." The stampede to Cariboo in '63 found him in the company of those who toil for gold and he made a fortune and lost it in two years. Wild Horse Creek (now Fort Steele) was a busy place in '65 and Brown, the prospector, was lured thither by the reports of rich placer mines.

Crossing the Rockies in 1865, Kootenai Brown had his first conflict with Indians at Seven Persons Creek near what is now Medicine Hat, Alberta. He rode a horse from Wild Horse Creek to Fort Garry (now Winnipeh) that year, spending the winter at Duck Lake with French half-breeds and pushing on to Fort Garry in the spring of 1886. Trading with Indians at Portage la Prairie was his business for a year or so, and this was followed by experiences such as few of the pioneers of the West have known and none but Colonel Cody (Buffalo Bill) have ever recorded.

But these are to be Kootenai Brown's recollections of the Pacific Coast, and in them there is much of the daring and danger closly identified with the early life of this coast.

I left England for the Panama Isthmus in the fall of 1861 with a friend named Vowell. It was the first year of the American Civil War, but this didn't seem to mean anything to the people of Panama. We heard there was a railway operating and we crossed

to the Pacific Coast on it. The distance was not very great, but travel was very slow. It took us four hours to go twenty-two miles.

Panama in that early day was not the place it is today. It was a land of mosquitoes that carried contagion and disease. The United States Government found this out when they undertook to build the Panama Canal. The precautions taken cost over a million dollars, but reduced the mortality almost to nothing.

Panama was a queer place. It has been called "the land of perpetual thirst." I thought I knew something about hot countries -- I had recently lived in India -- but the heat in Panama was different to that in India. When the rain fell on our hands or face it was almost hot enough to scald. Owing to an accident to mail steamboat to San Francisco we were delayed two weeks in getting away, so it gave us a good chance to see something. We made no effort to explore the interior, but we poled and rowed up the Chagres River and shot several deer, wild turkeys and an alligator. In those days we shot with ball and cap and had to hit in a vital place.

We found white men keeping stores at Panama and Colon at the two terminals of the railway. The soldiers were a queer-looking lot, dressed in khaki, with bare feet. The natives seemed to fish for a living and for recreation they gambled and promoted cock-fighting. I have traveled a good deal in my day but a more miserable crowd of people it has never been my misfortune to behold.

We landed at San Francisco in the early part of '62 and my friend Vowell and myself drove a team, hauling goods from the old warf

up town. It was a straggling little place in '62. It was about the size of Pincher Creek, but a different place altogether. The old warf was built of piles and timbers with plank flooring and it was so full of holes that you had to be an experienced "skinner" (teamster) to keep your team from getting their legs broken. That was my first experience with horses and I had a bad time of it. I didn't like it a bit, but I was broke when I landed in 'Frisco and I had to do something. My friend was not a skinner either, so we only stayed till we had a little "stake" and "vamoosed" for the North.

Victoria in 1862 had no idea of ever becoming the capital of anything. It was just "one of those little places". Any prairie town in Alberta is as big as Victoria was then. There were no trains crossing the mountains in those days. Only an occasional boat landed at Victoria and it carried adventurers looking for various forms of excitement on the Pacific Coast. Vancouver had not been thought of.

My friend came with me to Victoria and stayed there ever since. Not I; I have always had a roving disposition and since '62 I have seen most of western North America and in its roughest state. I have traveled the trails of Buffalo Bill and passed through the same experiences as he did.

Chopping poles in the vicinity of Victoria kept me afloat during my short stay of one winter. The most interesting man there I remember was Governor Dougals of the Hudson's Bay Company, who was head bamboo chief.

From 1861 to 1865 the most famous men on the Pacific Coast were Steele, Cunningham, Abbott, Barker, Cameron. Fame did not come to them because of any great humanitarian effort. They were conspicious as discoverers of gold in the Cariboo region of British Columbia, or operators of claims after the strikes had been made. One of them "Cariboo Cameron" as he was called, became very wealthy as a mine owner and operator.

There was a "gold rush", of course, something like that to Dawson City and the Yukon some years later when many of the original prospectors in the Cariboo pioneered the trails of the far north. The second year of the rush there was a toll bridge built across the Thompson River and the number of men who paid toll at that bridge was 9,000. Within two years 6,000 of them had come back flat broke.

I had no money when I went into the Cariboo in 1863, and I had none when I came out in 1864, but I had a little fortune for a little while in between. Like thousands of other miners I made and lost a fortune in two years.

When I left Williams Creek I had fifty cents in my pocket; my clothes were in rags; I had no shirt and no socks, but I had a pair of good boots. When I got to Boston Bar, a little village on the Fraser River just below Hell's Gate, I still had fifty cents in my pocket. I was looking for a job and got it.

In 1864 all provisions and tools for the gold-mining camps in Cariboo had to be transported by water up the Fraser River. It was no easy job, but, while it took a good man to do it, no

man wanted to do it unless he was broke and down on his luck. From Boston Bar up river for twenty-five miles was a mad chammel all white water. Huge canoes made of cedar log, carrying five tons of cargo had to be cordelled -- that is hauled all the way. It took four days to make Boston Bar to Kanaka Bar. We came down in two and a half hours with the same canoe.

The canoes were huge affairs. The cedar in British Columbia grows to an enormous size and the boats used by the early prospectors and pioneers of Cariboo were all hewn out of solid cedar trees. They made fine boats; but put beside the birchbark canoes built to carry the same weight and used by Indians in the North and East, they were very unwieldy affairs. They were the only things we could get to haul freight and we had to use them. There were three of these on the Fraser River when I was there. Of course there were smaller craft as well, all made by Indians. The big ones were thirty feet long with a seven-foot beam and had a saloon at the bow. You had to stand up to steer.

We were paid $6 a day and board on the boats on the Fraser River, but the work was no sinecure. Sometimes the boat would stick and we would have to take the cargo ashore and "pack" it with head straps a couple of miles or more over the sides of mountains impassable to horses and wagons. On these portages we would carry from 150 to 300 pounds according to the strength and endurance of man.

The Fraser between Boston Var and Kanaka Bar was a very swift-running river. The rate was about twelve miles an hour. The Belly River is considered swift, and it runs five miles and hour.

The Missouri meanders along at about two miles. So you see what we were up against when we attempted to run a boat up the Fraser from Boston Bar. Going through Hell's Gate was the worst. I stood on the bank once and saw a whole crew of thirteen men drowned in Hell's Gate. We never saw one of them again. I suppose the swift water carried them, perhaps right out to the Gulf of Georgia.

Before I left Williams Creek there were three Jews -- I never found out their names -- who had acquired a large amount of gold dust. The government provided what was called a "gold escort" -- an armed body of twenty-five men -- whose duty it was to transport gold committed to their care from the interior out to the banks at New Westminister. A charge of so much per ounce of gold was made by the government for gold given into the custody of the "gold escort" and the trip out was made about once a month, two weeks coming and two weeks going.

To save the "gold escort" charges, these three Jews thought they would carry the gold out themselves. In Cariboo country at that time there were many desperadoes and thugs of various grades. It appears that three of these highwaymen got onto the game of the Jews carrying out the sacks of gold-dust and laid their plans. Waiting for them near Boston Bar they murdered all three and took the gold.

A few years later three men were strung up by vigilantes -- vigilantes is a Spanish word applied to a mob calling themselves protectors of the law and order. These desperadoes, when the rope was put around their necks at Florence, in the Bitter Root country of Montana, confessed to several crimes, one of which was the killing and robbing

of the three Jews near Boston Bar. One of them was the notorious Boonhelm, well known throughout the Cariboo by old "forty-niners".

I said I had no shirt and socks coming out of the gold fields in '64; as a matter of fact I had only a coat, braces, pants, boots and a hat. It was not avvery warm outfit, especially at night, so I crawled into a hole for shelter wherever it was possible. This night it began to rain and I crawled into a big hollow cedar tree.

About midnight three men, very suspicious-looking characters, even for a gold trail, came right along into the timber where I was and started a fire not twenty-five steps from where I was concealed. I could hear every word they said and could see them handling three sacks of gold and discussing their escape. Their fire shone right in my face and it goes without saying that if they had known of my proximity I wouldn't have lasted two minutes. They would have killed me.

I couldn't get any further into the tree and I dared not move to rustle leaves for fear they would discover me. I was glad when at daybreak they picked up their blankets and sacks of gold and beat it. I had no gun and no weapons for protection, not even a pocket knife. I heard about two days after that the three Jews had been murdered and then I understood the conversation I had heard while prisoner in the tree. I never saw two of them again, but it was my misfortune to have a little job to do for the third one some time after. I heard from a friend who was present when they were hanged in their confession of this and other crimes.

My first winter in Cariboo I went in with a fellow on a trapping

venture. We made $3000 in about three months trapping marten. This gave me my start in mining, and I made a good many times that much and lost it in the next year.

After my experiences on the Fraser River I was made a constable at Wild Horse Creek (now Fort Steele), and in that capacity I saw some unusual things.

Three men came into Wild Horse and succeeded in passing several thousand dollars' worth of bogus gold dust, It was an amalgam composed of 75 per cent copper, 5 per cent lead, and 20 per cent gold. It was a very good imitation. The nuggets were made by dropping the molten metal from a high building. The fall made them exactly the shape of real nuggets.

Well, these three fellows -- Kirby, Conklin, and a third, whose name I forget -- he was one of the desperados who helped to kill the Jews, and was afterwards hanged wth Boonhelm at Florence -- these three brought in the amalgam, bought goods and paid for them with it. They were pointed out to me at once, and I marked them as suspicious-looking characters. When it was discovered that a lot of bogus nuggets were in circulation at the Creek I went to arrest the three strangers. They were living in a one-roomed cabin, and I knocked at the door. Getting no reply I burst open the door and Kirby grabbed for his gun. I had him covered and I called out to him:

"Throw up your hands or I'll make a lead mine of your carcass."

While I was getting Kirby out of the cabin the other two escaped.

After putting my prisoner under lock and key I organized a posse, and we were not long in locating Conklin and his pal, who were also put behind the bars. Just after this happened, and before the prisoners could be brought to trial, I got an appointment as a guard at the penitentiary at New Westminster, and left Wild Horse Creek. My successor, whom I recommended to Judge Cox as a suitable man for the job, had a streak of bad luck with the three men I left him in the jail.

Among the pieces of good advice I offered the young fellow was never to allow more than one prisoner out at one time and never, on any account, to turn his back on a prisoner. I regret to say that one morning he thoughtlessly disregarded this advice and let all three out at one time to wash for breakfast. He turned his back for a moment, when Conklin "put the mug on him" (threw his arm under his chin and held his head back), then gagged and tied him.

Then they took his horse and what money he had, his clothes and his gun, and made a clean getaway. The jail was in a lonely part of the creek and their escape was not known till the butcher called for the meat order. He knocked at the door but got no answer. Returning with a blacksmith, the lock was pried off and on entering they found the constable bound and gagged and locked in a cell, but the cells of the prisoners were empty. A search party was organized but no trace of the desperados was ever found.

About a week after the incident related above, the young constable, Hubble was his name, was shot. A murder was reported up the creek and Hubble went in search of the murderer. He caught up with him about four miles out of Wild Horse Creek at a tributary called

Brewery Creek. The fellow saw the constable pursuing him and jumped behind a tree. Hubble was green at the business and instead of ordering the villain out or getting help, he advanced singlehanded. The yards and shot him in the middle of wards and shot him in the middle of the forehead. (Sic!) He grabbed the dead man's horse and dashed off down the trail. A bunch of miners happening along, saw what had occurred and pursued the murderer. After exchanging a few shots, a miner's bullet found a vital spot in his carcass and he rolled off the horse, dead.

Immediately after the murder of the constable related above, there was a hold-up robbery close to the village of Lillooet, which means in Haida Indian language "Sweet water". There are mineral springs Lillooet.

The discovery of gold had brought a lot of honest miners to the country, but as in all mining regions there followed in the wake of the miners, criminals of all classed from the three card monte man to the thug, highwayman, robber, and burglar.

It appears that an old Frenchman was traveling toward Lillooet with five pack animals. He had reached within seven miles of the place when a tramp overtook him. Just as he did so a blue grouse flew into a tree close by.

"I'm a good shot, give me your gun and I'll get that grouse for dinner, said the tramp to the Frenchman.

But instead of shooting the grouse the highwayman pointed the gun and order the Frenchman to stand and deliver. The Frenchman immediately turned and ran and the robber emptied the contents

of the gun into his back. The man fell as if dead and the bandit robbed him of all the gold he had on him and in his packs, and taking one of the best horses fled back on the trail from Lillooet.

In a few minutes the wounded man came to himself and getting on a horse hurried as fast as he could to the settlement. He told the story and the constable there, getting ten citizens all mounted pursued the desperado up the trail. The road ran through a precipitous canyon up the sides of which a horse could not be forced. The pursuers gained on the fugitive, who jumped off the horse he bestrode and ran up the hillside as fast as the nature of the ground would allow. The posse opened fire on him and called on him to surrender, but he got behind some big rocks and returned fire. After several shots had been exchanged there was no further firing from the vagabond, so the pursuers finally surrounded him. His ammunition was exhausted and he surrendered. He was kept in jail at Lillooet for several months and finally was brought before Judge Begbie and sentended to imprisonment for life. There were, of course, other counts against him. I had the pleasure of taking care of this prisoner during the short time I was turn-key at the penitentiary at New Westminster.

I remember a killing at Williams Lake House, fifty miles from Williams Creek in the Cariboo, country. It was a wayside stopping place and of course, frequented by miners going and coming on the Cariboo trail. The incident I am telling occurred late in the fall of 1863.

There was a large number of miners leaving diggings where provisions and other necessaries were high. They were going out to New

Westminster, Victoria, San Francisco, and other towns for the winter. I should say here that very little mining was carried on in the Cariboo country in winter excepting in tunnels. All claims were laid over by the gold commissioner until a reasonable time in the spring. I did not go out the two winters I spent in Cariboo but put in the time trapping and did very well at it.

I was at Williams Lake House for the night and there was a big crowd. As usual a monte game was in progress, but because it was slack season in mining the stakes were small. Gilchrist, a professional gambler, was dealing Spanish Monte.

Now to make this story clear I'll have to go back to San Francisco It appears that some yeats before this night, this man Gilchrist had a dispute in a card game in 'Frisco with another man whose name I cannot recall. The two pulled guns but were separated by friends. They, however, vowed that if they ever met again they would kill on sight.

While Gilchrist was playing inside the saloon at Williams Lake House his enemy from San Francisco rode into camp.

A man who knew them both said to the newcomer:

"Your old enemy is inside dealing monte."

After he had put his horse away he came in to where the game was in progress, but Gilchrist did not notice him as he was "keeping" the game. The visitor approached the table and threw down a twenty dollar gold piece on a card. This was rather in excess of the amounts that were being played that night, so

Gilchrist looked up to see who had planked down the gold. Instantly both pistols were pulled. The newcomer missed and somebody threw up Gilchrist's arm and his bullet missed the man he intended it for but flew across the room and struck a young Englishman right in the forehead, killing him dead.

Most of us when the shooting began, made for the door and some for the windows, and the room was partially cleared. When we saw the young fellow fall we rushed back. The trouble-maker from 'Frisco managed to get his horse and get away, and we never saw him again. Gilchrist, the man whose shot found a victim in the Englishman came back with his six-shooter in his hand.

"Why," he said, "my goodness! Is it possible I have killed this poor fellow? I never saw the man before. It was pure accident." There were people there, however, who knew what British law was and told him he had better fly for his life. Gilchrist said:

"No, I'm guilty of no crime. It was pure accident."

In the meantime some one had started to Lilloot for a sheriff, who arrived the next afternoon. He took Gilchrist into custody and took him to the jail in Lilloot. He was tried at New Westminster and sentenced to a term of years, but was released, I afterwards heard at the end of two years as the result of a largely signed petition presented to Governor Douglas.

Material sent by Mrs. Dichmont, Calgary.